

Certification for Challenge Course Practitioners

by Brian Lisson and Sarah Oosterhuis

After many long years of debate, consultation, and preparation, certification for challenge/ropes course practitioners is finally here. In February 2007 the Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT) approved new standards for the certification of Challenge Course Practitioners. These standards will be used by accredited professional vendor members of ACCT in the training and certification of practitioners and may also be used as a reference by others. These new standards represent the first common approach to certification in our industry. Certification provides an opportunity for organizations to know what they are getting when they hire staff members. It is intended to raise the bar by promoting higher standards of competence among challenge course practitioners and to create some uniformity in the industry.

Standard Setting Organizations

ACCT is a trade organization of challenge course installation and training organizations as well as programs and other interested parties. While its membership is primarily based in the US there are accredited professional vendor, associate and institutional members internationally, including in Ontario.

The organization was formed in 1993 and since that time has published consensus-based standards for challenge/ropes courses in the areas of installations, operations, inspections and ethics (ACCT, 2004). These standards have been utilized widely in Ontario, and adherence to aspects of them is required in both the Ontario Camping Association Guidelines for Accreditation (OCA, 2006) and the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA) Physical Education Safety Guidelines (OPHEA, 2004). The addition of practitioner certification standards complements the existing standards.

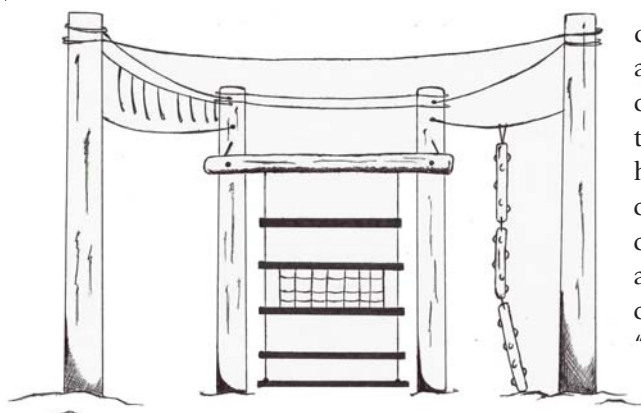
Certification vs. Accreditation — What's the Difference?

Outdoor education and experiential educators have long debated the merits of certification and accreditation. Accreditation places emphasis on the whole organization and the systems that help it manage risk. Accreditation communicates to the public that an organization has been judged by its peers to meet a particular set of agreed upon industry practices (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006). Certification on the other hand places the emphasis on the individual's ability to meet a set of pre-requisites, achieve a minimum level of training, and demonstrate competency in a pre-determined set of skills (Ford & Blanchard, 1993). Certification is often more valuable in communicating to organizations that provide outdoor and experiential education programs that a staff member holds a predictable set of competencies.

There are merits to both accreditation and certification. Often accredited organizations will employ certified staff — essentially using both mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness of their services and manage risks effectively. In Ontario, there are many examples of both accreditation and certification programs that have served the outdoor education community well.

Challenge Course Practitioner Certification

In choosing to create certification standards, ACCT has responded to the industry's demand for a common standard for the training and assessment of challenge course practitioners. In the past, organizations offering training programs developed their own course formats and assessment systems. Many of these training programs provided some kind of "certification" following course participation. Across North America there were significant



differences among training courses regarding total course hours, content covered and candidate assessment criteria. To be “certified” meant entirely different things

depending on the organization providing the certification. The words training and certification were often used interchangeably, making it difficult to know how or if an instructor’s skills were being evaluated. The lack of uniformity in training provided by different organizations meant that certifications were often not portable.

The new ACCT standards create a common approach to describing the set minimum competencies required by practitioners offering challenge course programming while still allowing individual training organizations to make decisions about the specific practices to be covered. Certification will require that candidates meet necessary pre-requisites, participate in training that includes particular knowledge and skills, and successfully complete an evaluation process including a written test and practical assessment. Certification will continue to be delivered by independent training organizations, not by ACCT. ACCT has simply set the standards and reviewed the operating practices of organizations that have chosen to participate in its Professional Vendor Member Accreditation Program.

The new challenge course practitioner certification standards (ACCT, 2007) include three levels: Level One is intended for entry level practitioners; Level Two for practised facilitators; and Challenge Course Manager for experienced managers. Each level provides for different tracks (options or operating systems) for certification: Low or Spotted Activities Only; High Activities Only; or Full Certification, which includes both Low and High Activities.

There is also a provision for site/system specific training to receive official recognition, but this track of certification is not designed to be portable. At each level, the standards outline particular pre-requisites including hours of experience and specify a particular number of training hours. Additionally, the new standards have an age requirement.

Whenever a new certification system is implemented a mechanism must be created to ensure that experienced practitioners do not need to start at the beginning. The ACCT standards do this through “challenging-in” provisions. Requirements for challenging-in at each level are outlined in the chart on the following pages.

What Does Certification Mean for Me and My Program?

There is no requirement for all people working on ropes courses to be certified to these standards. In some cases customized or in-house trainings may be appropriate. Summer camps in particular may find it difficult to attract staff members who meet the age and/or experience requirements. In such cases a mixed approach may be necessary, where some certified staff supervise other staff who have received a custom training appropriate to their responsibilities and facility.

ACCT practitioner certification is intended to raise the quality of programming on challenge/ropes courses. In Ontario organizations have long used the installation and inspection standards to improve the quality of the physical structure of their ropes courses. They have used the operations standards to improve the delivery of their programs. Practitioner certification now creates a new opportunity in Ontario to ensure that staff members who are delivering and supervising programs meet a common minimum standard of training and experience.

For more information about the ACCT practitioner certification standards please visit www.acctinfo.org.

Summary of ACCT Challenge Course Practitioner Certification Requirements

Level	Level 1	Level 2	Challenge Course Manager
Track	Full certification Spotted activities only High activities only Site/System specific	Full certification Spotted activities only High activities only Site/System specific	Full certification Spotted activities only High activities only Site/System specific
Age	Minimum age 18	Minimum age 18	Minimum age 21
Hours of Training	Full certification — 40 hours; Spotted activities only — 20 hours; High activities only — 20 hours; Site/System specific — 8 hours	Full certification — 80 hours total*; Spotted activities only — 44 hours total*; High activities only — 44 hours total*; Site/System specific — 24 hours total*	30 hours of management training, 16 must be specific to challenge course management. Level 2 certification required. Total of 110 hours for full certification**
Prior Experience	None	200 documented hours as Level 1	500 documented hours experience, including facilitation and management
Work Independently	Within the limits of training or under the supervision of Level 2 or a CCM	Within the limits of training and experience or under the supervision of a more experienced Level 2 or a CCM	Will be able to supervise all aspects of the Challenge Course including developing policies and procedures.
Ability to Train Others	Not designed to prepare someone to train	Not designed to prepare someone to train	Capable of developing a plan for mentoring and in service training in LOPs and some skills
Staff Competencies from Operations Standards	Meets all staff competencies, can apply to routine, familiar program delivery situations with supervision and support	Fully meets all staff competencies, can apply to solving most non-routine situations, can provide leadership to other staff	Fully meets all staff competencies, can manage others, can implement the operations management of a facility
Rescues	Not expected to execute rescues	Able to rescue and direct other staff. Spotted Only not expected to rescue.	Able to rescue and direct other staff. Spotted Only not expected to rescue.
Leading Edge Climbing	Will be able to climb except for spotted only activities level and those systems that do not require leading edge climbing	Will be able to climb except for spotted only activities level and those systems that do not require leading edge climbing	Will be able to climb except for spotted only activities level and those systems that do not require leading edge climbing
Duration	1 year	3 years	5 years

Level	Level 1	Level 2	Challenge Course Manager
Recertification	50 hours experience plus retest or 8 additional hours of training plus retest	150 hours experience plus 24 hours training plus retest or 40 hours training (24 hours for spotted activities only or high only, 16 for site/system specific) plus retest	300 hours experience (may include 30 hours additional training) plus retest, or retake 30 hours CCM training and retest. A CCM whose Level 2 certification is expired is required to provide a plan for rescue and leading edge climbs, except for spotted only activities level and systems that do not require leading edge climbing.
Challenging In	Portfolio of at least 100 hours of program experience and training, plus test	Portfolio of at least 400 hours of program experience plus 80 hours of training (44 hours for spotted activities only or high activities only, 24 hours for site/system specific), plus test	Level 2 certification plus portfolio of at least 600 hours experience, 30 hours managerial training, plus test.
Testing	Score of at least 80% on a written knowledge test that includes content that meets the Level 1 standards, and a practical skills test. Some specific basic skills must be passed in order to qualify.	Score of at least 80% on a written knowledge test that includes content that meets the Level 2 Standards, and a practical skills test. Some specific basic skills must be passed in order to qualify.	Score of at least 80% on a written knowledge test and a practical skills test based on Chapter 3 section A of the ACCT operations standards.

*Level 2 training hours — total includes the hours required for Level 1 plus additional hours of Level 2 curriculum.

**CCM training hours — total includes the hours required for Level 2 plus additional hours for CCM curriculum.

© 2007 Association for Challenge Course Technology, Reprinted with Permission

References

Association for Challenge Course Technology. (2004). *Challenge course standards (6th ed.)*. Deerfield, IL: ACCT.

Association for Challenge Course Technology. (2007). *Practitioner certification standards*. Deerfield, IL: ACCT.

Ford, P. & Blanchard, J. (1993). *Leadership and administration of outdoor pursuits (2nd ed.)*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.

Martin, B., Cashel, C., Wagstaff, M. & Breunig, M. (2006). *Outdoor leadership: Theory and practice*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Ontario Camping Association. (2006).

Guidelines for Accreditation. Toronto, ON: OCA.

Ontario Physical and Health Education

Association. (2004). *Physical education safety guidelines*. Toronto: ON. OPHEA.

Brian Lisson is the President of Adventureworks! Associates, Inc., a Professional Vendor Member (Level 3) of ACCT. He has been working on ropes courses in Ontario for the past 24 years. Sarah Oosterhuis is Director of Training at Challenges Unlimited Inc., a Professional Vendor Member (Level 4) of ACCT.